Chapter 14
Empowering 21st Century Learners through Personal Learning Networks

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ABSTRACT
The discourse surrounding digital natives and their learning needs often presupposes a level of social media knowledge or savviness that is equal, if not superior, to that of any other generation, including that of their teachers. Although it is undeniable that this new breed of students feels comfortable using social media as an integral part of their wired lives, the assumption that digital immersion results in digital literacy may end up preventing a whole generation of students from learning how to take full advantage of the digital tools they grew up with. As long as this assumption goes unchallenged, the net generation may very well continue navigating this digitally mediated world without ever truly understanding the strategic uses of social media technologies. If we are to prepare 21st century students for today’s highly competitive global marketplace and rapidly changing world, we need to teach them how to direct their own learning. Fortunately, today’s social media technologies make it easier than ever for students to develop independent learning skills. In this chapter we discuss how students can use various social media platforms to identify and connect to communities of experts capable of supporting their learning needs and how to incorporate these personal learning networks into everyday pedagogical practice.
INTRODUCTION

“The summation of human experience is being expanded at a prodigious rate, and the means we use for threading through the consequent maze to the momentarily important item is the same as was used in the days of square-rigged ships” (Bush, 1945, para. 8).

Hearing Vannevar Bush lament modern society’s struggle to keep up with the ever-accelerating pace of knowledge creation, it is important to remember that this statement was made over half a century ago. It is hard to imagine how Bush might react to today’s world of networked computers, search engines, and social networks. The sheer quantity of information available to us and the speed at which that information is being disseminated might not only feel overwhelming to some, but it also calls into question the adequacy of our current methods of education and is forcing us to rethink the ways in which we engage 21st century students. As Gonzalez (2004) points out, “half of what is known today was not known 10 years ago. The amount of knowledge in the world has doubled in the past 10 years and is doubling every 18 months according to the American Society of Training and Documentation. To combat the shrinking half-life of knowledge, organizations have been forced to develop new methods of deploying instruction” (para. 1). With the volume of knowledge exponentially increasing, our ability to acquire the knowledge we need for tomorrow is more important than what we already know today (Siemens 2005. In light of these developments it is likely that we will do a great disservice to coming generations of learners if we do not change our current pedagogical approaches.

Personal Learning Networks

One of the ways that may allow us to handle the onslaught of information and prepare our students for living in such a rapidly changing world is through the development of personal learning networks (PLNs). We define PLNs as deliberately formed networks of people and resources capable of guiding our independent learning goals and professional development needs (Weisgerber & Butler, 2011). By fostering collaboration between educators, professionals, and students, many teachers have already taken the opportunity to break down the metaphorical classroom walls (Parry, 2010). The new generation of digital natives, which now occupies our classrooms, offers an interesting opportunity and conversely poses an equally troubling problem. The discourse surrounding these digital natives and their learning needs often presupposes a level of social media knowledge or savviness that is equal, if not superior, to that of any other generation, including that of their teachers. Although it is undeniable that this new breed of students feels comfortable using social media as an integral part of their wired lives, the assumption that digital immersion results in digital literacy may prevent a whole generation of students from learning how to take advantage of the digital tools they grew up with. As long as this assumption goes unchallenged, the net generation may very well continue navigating this digitally mediated world without ever truly understanding the strategic uses of social media technologies.

The Independent Learner

When personal learning networks are discussed in the popular press they are invariably equated with one or more of autodidactical terms: independent learning, lifelong learning, self-regulated learning, or self-directed learning. The prefacing terms independent, auto and self would lead one to believe that PLNs are constructed only by the learner and with only their immediate need for information in mind. Although there are clearly components of self-initiation at work in these labels, the concepts themselves derive primarily from the field of androgogy. Androgogy, the field of adult education, has grown up around